

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

NEWS RELEASES

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Husch Blackwell Honored with NLADA's 2025 Beacon of Justice Award

National law firm Husch Blackwell was one of 30 law firms to be honored with the 2025 Beacon of Justice Award from the National Legal Aid & Defender Association. This year's honorees were recognized for their efforts to address issues related to sustaining equal justice for families and communities.

Husch Blackwell was recognized for its representation of Michelle Gilbank after one of her children was taken by the Wood County (Wisconsin) Department of Human Services, allegedly infringing on her constitutional rights.

After the child was returned to her, Gilbank filed suit in the Western District of Wisconsin against the agencies and individuals involved in the taking, arguing they violated her federal constitutional rights to due process and against unlawful search and seizure. The District Court initially held that it lacked subject-matter jurisdiction over the case under the *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine, which limits federal courts from reviewing certain state court decisions. Gilbank appealed the decision to the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit.

Recognizing the case's significance, the Seventh Circuit appointed Husch Blackwell to represent Gilbank pro bono. After oral argument to a panel, the Seventh Circuit decided *sua sponte* to rehear the case *en banc*.

Although the 11-judge court ultimately split 6-5 against our client and affirmed the lower court's dismissal, the Court agreed with Husch Blackwell's position that the *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine did not apply and that the federal court did have subject matter jurisdiction. In doing so, the Court adopted a new

standard for applying the doctrine—the standard Husch Blackwell advocated for.

The Husch Blackwell team was led by partner Joseph Diedrich and included attorneys AJ Fabianczyk, Kirsten Atanasoff, and Alyssa LeRoy.

Husch Blackwell will be recognized at the 2025 NLADA Exemplar Awards Gala on September 24, in Washington, DC.